

The Fabric of Media Literacy



If you asked science teachers what first inspired their interest in science, you would get very different answers. All would still be science teachers, but for some what excites them the most about science might be biodiversity or meteorology, while others might be fascinated by nanotechnology, robotics, the physics of space travel, or something else entirely. The same is true with media literacy. People come to the field with different interests, needs, goals and priorities.

In practice, because people come from very different contexts and take very different pathways into the field, media literacy is like the weave of a complex plaid fabric – many intersecting stripes of varying widths and colors that sometimes overlap, overshadow, blend, or exist in complementary but parallel worlds. The main “threads” in media literacy education include:

Appreciation – In the tradition of art history, music appreciation, and literary criticism, this thread stems from a desire to extend, adapt, and apply techniques long used to analyze and critique music, fine art, literature and poetry to newer art forms, especially film, and to some extent, television and popular music.¹ More recently, this interest has expanded to include video games and other digital media.

Civic Engagement – This thread is based on the Jeffersonian notion that a healthy democracy is dependent on an informed citizenry and that media play a crucial role in informing citizens. It concentrates on analysis of news and the persuasive techniques used in political speech and advertising. It also includes advocacy for high quality, independent journalism as an essential balance to government and corporate power.² In recent years, people have also begun to look at the ways that various types of media are used as tools for political organizing.

Consumer Education – An outgrowth of a “buyer beware” society, in which consumers are held responsible for their choices but are not always given the skills or information they need to protect themselves from deceptive, misleading, or stealth marketing, this strand often incorporates calls for increased government regulation of media along with analysis of advertising.³

Critical Studies – Grounded in Paulo Freire’s philosophy of education, this perspective defines as its goal the development of critical autonomy and solidarity with “the disempowered in a collective struggle for a more just world.” (Jeff Share, *Media Literacy is Elementary*, p. 35). Those who use this educational approach pay special attention to examining the ways in which media perpetuate oppressive power structures, including corporate hegemony over political, cultural, and economic agenda setting.



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Cultural Criticism – The premise of this strand is that media influence beliefs and actions, and they play an important role in shaping society. Analysis of the interplay between media and culture often examines issues such as stereotyping, racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, and materialism,⁴ reflecting George Gerbner’s notion that the mass media convey values and serve as the primary storytellers in modern society. Media ownership has also been of particular concern, especially as control over mass media has consolidated into fewer corporate hands (thereby strengthening commercial influence over content).



Educational Media – This thread comes from those who believe in the potential of media technologies to improve education and benefit students.⁵ Historically, this has sometimes taken the form of teachers using media technologies to teach (e.g., showing a film), or it has meant putting media technologies into students’ hands (e.g., having students work with computers or cameras). In other circumstances, media technologies have been used to restructure the learning environment itself (e.g., enabling distance learning or using computer software to offer individualized instruction). It has also meant creating media specifically intended to educate (e.g., electronic field trips, “serious” games like *Oregon Trail* or TV programs like *Sesame Street*).

Health – Sparked by a concern that certain types of media and media habits contribute to an array of health problems, this strand is built on the belief that education can be used to

prevent or protect people from what many health professionals see as media-related health problems. These typically include (but are not limited to) obesity, violence, negative body image, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, cyberbullying, and substance abuse.⁶



Parenting – The goals of parents have not changed much over the years: raise healthy, happy, capable children. This strand asks how one does that in a media-infused culture. As media have become ever more present in family life, the need has increased for parents to know how to manage their children’s screen time, limit exposure to age-inappropriate subject matter, find beneficial content, monitor online activities, convey their own values about media content, and help children think critically about media.⁷

Popular Culture – This thread is championed by teachers who believe that the traditional literary canon is not inherently more valuable than contemporary cultural expressions. They also recognize that pop culture is an important part of their students’ daily lives and see the inclusion of contemporary media “documents” as a way to keep their classes relevant and connected to the world outside of school.⁸

Religion – Because media are powerful conveyers of values, some religious institutions have found it important to provide believers with an educational “shield” to defend against media messages that undermine religious values. Others, like Srs. Rose Pacatte and Gretchen Hailer, have proposed “media mindfulness” as a way “to interpret our

culture's information and entertainment (storytelling) media in light of human and Gospel values, morality and spirituality, and the search for and discovery of meaning.” (p. 8).⁹

Research / Library Skills – New media have changed the research landscape, making access to information nearly infinite while frequently obscuring sources. This situation has compelled librarians and others to extend traditional skills of finding and citing information to new technologies, often with an added emphasis on discernment and assessing credibility of sources. This strand also often encompasses concerns about cut-and-paste plagiarism, the ethics of sampling and file-sharing, and the application of copyright law to educational settings.¹⁰



Social Justice¹¹ – The more central that media are to our lives, the more significant the ramifications of media-related or media-created disparities such as inequitable access to computers or injustice resulting from media repetition of negative stereotypes.

This thread promotes activism in education to address those inequities, as well as advocacy for media reform and government regulation.¹²

Vocational Education¹³ – This strand focuses on ensuring that students know how to use media technologies. For many years, that meant teaching students who were interested in media careers how to use equipment like video cameras or sound boards, or how to develop film. In the digital world, where computers are ubiquitous, there is still demand

for specialized media career training (e.g., computer programming, game development, and website construction and maintenance), but there is also a recognition that all students need to know how to interface with computers (e.g., how to keyboard, use a word processor, spreadsheet, multimedia presentation program or search engine) and how to use computers (and other digital media tools) to interface with others.

From these varied interests, educators typically combine selected threads to create their own cloth.¹⁴ Some threads are more conducive than others to a curriculum driven approach to media literacy education that is literacy- and inquiry-based, but it is possible to weave any of these into sound media literacy lessons.

¹ As the Ontario Ministry of Education summarized, “Media literate students are able to appreciate the creativity and artistry in many of the products of the mass media.” Media Literacy Resource Guide (1989, p.6). For other approaches to appreciation, see Art Silverblatt, *Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages*, 3rd ed. (Praeger, 2008) – especially p. 5 and Ch. 6, or James Potter, *Media Literacy*, 2nd edition, pp.10-12 (Sage, 2001)

² News literacy as a sub-specialty of media literacy has emerged from this thread with projects at selected schools (e.g., www.stonybrook.edu/journalism/newsliteracy/index.html or www.thenewsliteracyproject.org). For news literacy classroom resources, check out <http://newstrust.net/guides> or John McManus’ *Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the World Wide Web* (available from www.gradethenews.org through the NAMLE Marketplace).

³ Examples would include the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME) www.acmecoalition.org or the Media Literacy Project (www.nmmlp.org). For an example of a government agency addressing advertising issues, see www.admongo.gov, an online game created by the Federal Trade Commission. The Canadian group www.adbusters.org, which spoofs ads, is another popular resource for educators interested in this thread.

⁴ The Media Education Foundation (www.mediaed.org) specializes in films that explore cultural criticism and the role of media. Their catalogue provides a who’s who of cultural critics.

⁵ See, for example, William Kist (2010), *The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching in the New Media Age* and, for beginners, Susan Brooks-Young (2010), *Teaching with the Tools Kids Really Use, as well as the publications and websites of* Will Richardson, Alan November, Kathy Schrock, ISTE, and SETDA.

⁶ There are so many people and organizations that have used media literacy to address health issues that it would be impossible to list them all. Here are a few favorites:

* For issues related to girls and body image: www.about-face.org; The Body Positive (found at both www.thebodypositive.com and www.thebodypositive.org); Girls, Inc. and the Girl Scouts also have media literacy projects.

* For substance abuse issues: Brian Primack at the University of Pittsburgh; Lynda Bergsma at the University of Arizona; Children's Media Project, *Smoke Screens: From Tobacco Outrage to Media Activism*.

* For a variety of issues: Michael Rich and the Center on Media and Child Health; Marilyn Cohen and the Northwest Center for Excellence in Media Literacy Teen Health Project.

⁷ There are dozens of organizations and individuals who address media literacy for parents. One useful starting place is www.pbs.org/parents/childrenandmedia/.

⁸ One good place to keep up with pop culture resources for classroom use is Ryan Goble's Making Curriculum Pop Ning: <http://mcpopmb.ning.com/>.

⁹ For more on a faith-based approach to media literacy, see Sr. Rose's blog at <http://sisterrose.wordpress.com/>, or the archived articles from the Center for Media Literacy's *Media and Values*: www.medialit.org/reading-room/media-literacy-faith-communities

¹⁰ There is no better starting place to find resources and organizations related to this thread than the American Library Association www.ala.org. For more information about practices and principles regarding copyright and fair use applied to media literacy in the classroom, see Renee Hobbs' book, *Copyright Clarity* (Corwin, 2010), and the related curriculum materials available on Temple University's Media Education Lab website (www.mediaeducationlab.org).

¹¹ This strand has a lot in common with critical literacy, but there are people who take a social justice approach that do not use a critical literacy approach, so we distinguish the two as separate strands.

¹² This thread is typified by anti-bias materials developed by groups concerned with the public image of a particular constituency, such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL - Jews) or GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network), or by economic justice organizations such as the Urban League or One Economy.

¹³ This thread significantly overlaps with the Educational Media strand, but with a greater focus on workforce preparation.

¹⁴ For example, the health teacher who asks students to take a critical look at fast food commercials would be drawing from the health and consumer education strands. If those ads depicted parent-child relationships and gender stereotypes, the activity would also include parenting, and cultural criticism threads. If he extended the activity with an investigation of the ways in which fast food corporations affect farming, that would be adding a critical literacy thread. And a follow-up activity using cameras and computers to make counter-ads that students share with company managers and local news outlets would be drawing from the vocational and media education as well as social justice strands.